

A FORUM ON THE POLITICS OF SKILLS

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The *ILR Review* invited this group of scholars who work within the fields of sociology, history, and urban planning to share their perspective on the politics of skills. We called on their expertise to draw attention to the politics that drive the definition and development of skill and its use in shaping the rights and voice of workers. The essays in this forum explore the politics of skill along three lines. First, they interrogate the definition and assessment of skill, with particular attention to the ways that structural markers of social difference—such as race, gender, class, and immigration status—shape the valuation of skill. Second, they analyze the ways that the interpretation of skill is shaped by power dynamics at the worksite and in the broader economy. This line of analysis also considers possibilities for industrial renewal and labor mobilization. And third, the essays explore how skill classifications are used to narrow political and civil rights and to justify forms of exploitation and dehumanization.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

PAUL OSTERMAN*

The fundamental lesson to take from the interesting papers that make up this forum is that the concept of skill is more complex and contested than normally understood. This point is important because of the widespread and generally accepted view that the modern labor market privileges skill as the marker of success and that public policy addressing insecurity and inequality should focus on skill. But how should we understand skill? These essays point to the nuances of this question. I take the following lessons from what we learn here.

We should clearly distinguish three ideas: skill as a label, as capacity, and as ability to learn or develop capacity. The terms skilled and unskilled are

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often, as several essays make clear, labels used as control mechanisms. Set against this is capacity, that is, the ability to perform tasks. For example, in her book on Qatar, Natasha Iskander (2021) described the extensive investments that construction firms make to develop the capacities of their workforce needed for complex construction yet nonetheless they are labeled unskilled, a designation that justifies imposition of extensive control systems. Similarly, in the present essay she describes Amazon's control systems for its "unskilled" warehouse workers. This said, skill labels and control systems are not perfectly correlated. Control systems similar to those used by Amazon are imposed by other employers on employees who are likely not labeled as unskilled (for example coders or call center salespeople who must know their products in detail).

Skill, or better said capacity, is a multidimensional concept. Recently a committee of the National Research Council (2012), largely made up of educators and psychologists, reviewed what we know about the meaning of skill (what I am calling capacity) in the workplace and how it is rewarded. The committee identified three broad dimensions of capacity—cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal—and identified the components of each as well as what we know about how these elements are measured and rewarded. As Bridget Anderson forcefully points out, it is clear that any simple, unidimensional characterization of people and jobs as "skilled" and "unskilled" is deeply misleading.

A political, racialized, and gendered component contributes to what is seen to constitute skill or capacity. Joe William Trotter Jr. offers numerous examples of how highly skilled African American workers are neither recognized nor rewarded for their capacities. It is not just that capacity does not pay off but also that in some respects it is invisible. Rina Agarwala describes how skill classifications are used as a control device and sorting mechanism in Indian emigration policy. She points to the way that the politization of skill can distort and undermine government policy attempts to build skill within the workforce.

Another example is that highly complex care work, a "women's occupation," is often seen as unskilled and equivalent to babysitting with the consequence that for decades paid home care was not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act (Osterman 2017). These cases suggest that the recognition of skill/capacity can be driven by ascriptive considerations that have little to do with actual capacities, and even when capacities are recognized they sometimes go unrewarded for the same reasons.

No simple relationship links capacity and reward. Conventional measures of skill or capacity, for example educational attainment or math capacities, are typically positive and significant in earnings equations. However, even after controlling for these measures a great deal of variance remains. If we want to understand who is rich and who is poor and the trajectory of the earnings distribution, then understanding the distribution of skill provides us with an incomplete answer. The persistence of unexplained variance has been long understood by researchers but this point does raise the

question: Why, for many decades, have America's anti-poverty policies been largely focused on skill provision? The answer is that an emphasis on skill implies explanations (and policies) centered on the capacities and limitations of individuals rather than on the institutional structure of the labor market.

All of this said, skill thought of as capacity is a real thing and important for success at work. All the foregoing notwithstanding, deconstruction and critical theory can go too far. If someone does not know how to use a computer they are less likely to find good work. Work is increasingly organized in teams and the ability to interact with colleagues is important to success. A great many jobs require the capacity to problem solve. You need to know how to weld to be a welder and how to use a spreadsheet to work as an accountant. These are simple facts about work: Good jobs require good capacities. Of course, as Iskander and Lowe (2013) have convincingly pointed out in the context of residential construction, there is more than one way to undertake a task and achieve an outcome, and too often people who are on the margin are not recognized for what they can do. But this does not undermine the observation that skills thought of as capacities are real and important and not simply social constructions.

Capacities can be taught either by employers or by training organizations. Employer-provided training is the largest and perhaps most effective source of skill development, but too often employers limit their investments to employees who are already well educated and in high skill jobs (Osterman 2022). For this reason it is important to understand that effective job training programs can teach skills and, as an example, move someone from a low wage services-sector job into a well-paying health care job (Osterman 2020; Roder and Elliott 2021). There is no reason, other than a lack of political will and resources, that anyone should be limited to a lifetime of "low skill" work.

The provision of skill and capacity is part of the larger political economy of a country or a region. As has been emphasized in the Varieties of Capitalism literature, countries, or blocks of countries, vary in how firms, government, schools, and unions work together (or do not work together) to generate skills in a workforce. A common example is the highly structured German dual apprenticeship system, which incorporates the social partners, compared to the decentralized and scarcely managed American approach to training young people for work. The German system is seen as an important component of the broader approach to macro-economic management and labor market regulation. However, although American policy specialists often look longingly at the German example, the existing American approach offers advantages for greater flexibility and more rapid responsiveness.

This said, it is also the case that viewing national systems as homogeneous can be misleading. Across the United States considerable variation occurs in the degree of involvement of the business community, schools, community groups, and unions in building out a regional training infrastructure.

Nichola Lowe's work on the Research Triangle in North Carolina (2021) provides a strong illustration of this observation.

Training policy is an arena that can enhance opportunity and improve job quality. As Lowe points out in her contribution to this forum, in an era of slow labor force growth and a coming retirement wave, employers may be willing to come to the table with community groups, unions, and government to build a national, or regional, training and skills policy that enhances economic opportunity. In return for a skilled labor force, the deal with employers would be to improve job quality and create ladders that lead upward to better jobs. Skills, and policies to deliver it, become assets and not barriers.

A TOOL FOR WORKPLACE DEVELOPMENT:
HOW NON-DEGREE CREDENTIALS CAN HELP
RAISE JOB QUALITY STANDARDS

NICHOLA LOWE*

Non-degree credentials are finally having a well-deserved moment as they are increasingly recognized as a viable alternative for securing meaningful work (rather than following more standard routes from a bachelor's or associate's degree). The latest estimates indicate that more than 721,000 unique non-degree options are available in the United States, with more anticipated in years to come (Forbes and Reamer 2021). Community colleges are in the mix, accounting for approximately 165,000 of these alternate pathways, but so are many other public and private training and certification providers. Unlike academic degrees, which can take years to complete, non-degree credentials tend to be shorter in length. Participants invest anywhere from a few weeks to several months, and they cost much less as a result.

Private foundations and nonprofits, including the Lumina Foundation, Credential Engine, Workcred, and the National Skills Coalition, are leading this national trend and are joining forces with a 270-member research network¹ to puzzle through the mediating factors that can translate these credentials into higher earnings. Their hope is that increased skill

¹The Non-degree Credentials Research Network, formed in 2019, is managed by researchers at George Washington University.

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development options will open pathways for older workers to more easily transition out of declining occupations or industries, while smoothing labor market entry for younger generations.

But could this coordinated effort to promote non-degree alternatives play a more transformative role—not just preparing a better skilled workforce but improving what happens within the workplace itself, ensuring those with newly certified skills gain access to higher-paying, more stable, and better quality jobs?

The US Job Quality Crisis

Job quality standards have been declining in the United States for decades now, contributing to rising income inequality and greater worker precarity. With the exception of the past year or so, wages have stagnated or steadily declined for most workers since the early 1980s. Claims that low-paying, poor quality jobs are simply the result of lesser skilled individuals have been widely refuted (Howell 2000; Osterman 2000; Card and DiNardo 2002; Folbre 2016). Evidence instead points to a hollowing out of labor market institutions—a decline of union and employment protections, along with a raft of anti-worker policies and actions that have slowly chipped away at economic security (Osterman 2011; Weil 2014; Bivens and Shierholz 2018). Creative and coordinated institutional solutions are sorely needed if we want to address this deep-seated job quality crisis.

So how might non-degree training and credentialing programs contribute to that institutional response?

A foundational step involves active employer engagement, and with it, rebuilding the influence that institutions can have over employment decisions. Many programs that currently offer non-degree credentials already rely on local and regional employers for input on what training to offer and in what format. Advocates of non-degree credentials reinforce the need for ongoing employer involvement, recognizing those close connections as most critical for ensuring the skills being provided remain in step with industry desires and needs (Gaston and Van Noy 2022).

But those relationships can be structured as mutually generative, meaning training institutions can make demands on employers in exchange for their offer of ongoing support—a worker-supporting step long used by US labor unions when engaging employers around industry-wide training solutions. Some non-union vocational training providers already act on this possibility, and their approach to shaping employment practices holds lessons for further replication. In certain cases, training providers also help local businesses recruit and screen individuals for job openings. Some have then opted to limit those placement services, along with customized "in-demand" training, to only those companies willing to guarantee a family-sustaining livable wage, which establishes a clear threshold that can motivate others to also change (Schrock 2013). But some providers go a step further, recognizing they can also help employers that are not yet committed to that approach move in the right direction (Lowe 2021).

These actions involve changing the standard business mindset, especially among smaller-sized firms that are a significant source of low-paying, poor quality jobs in the United States. That means convincing these firms that valuable gains can be made by becoming an “employer of choice.” Raising wage levels and enhancing working conditions, for example, can reduce costly worker turnover, while generating longer-term advantages from having more productive and inspired work teams. Rather than appealing to employer goodwill, these training providers make the business case for job quality, while leveraging knowledge of industry and regional trends to help reinforce that message to business owners and managers.

Of course, not all non-degree providing institutions have the capacity to directly influence employer thinking, much less bargain with them to raise job standards, and some programs, by design, will have little day-to-day interaction with local employers and job market dynamics more generally. Additionally, companies themselves can face complex, often interconnected challenges of their own, meaning that for some firms it will be difficult, if not impossible, to shift problematic employment practices without triggering additional pressure points. This circumstance is when other industry-supporting partners can play an important reinforcing role.

Sectoral initiatives are especially promising and with long-noted successes (Lautsch and Osterman 1998; Conway and Giloth 2014; Katz, Roth, Hendra, and Schaberg 2020). These programs provide industry-specific training solutions and expertise, opening the possibility for coordinated responses to address non-workforce challenges, be they related to market access, technology adoption, or even supply chain integration. In manufacturing, for example, non-degree training providers have partnered with federally funded manufacturing extension centers, working side-by-side with manufacturing specialists to devise integrated strategies that simultaneously alleviate production and technology adoption constraints while improving the overall worker experience within small- and medium-sized manufacturing firms (Lowe, Schrock, Jain, and Conway 2021). In some cases, these solutions have even shifted some of the responsibility for workforce training on to firms themselves, helping manufacturers launch apprenticeships or re-establish internal career ladders in ways that also involve certifying and thus formalizing work-based learning processes. By using credentials to reinforce an in-house “culture of learning,” these institutional partnerships ensure that skill is recognized as an enduring investment in a company’s future rather than narrowly construed as an individual attribute whose responsibility for development lies elsewhere.

Employers Need Training Too

Growing national appreciation for non-degree credentials, which is refreshingly non-partisan, should embolden efforts by leading advocates to shift more of their energy from elevating the visibility of non-degree credentials to assessing what is needed to improve what is available now and in the future.

Proposals for how to generate greater gains for those securing credentials are already in circulation. Some are focused on increasing transparency (Everhart, Green, O'Brien, and Soares 2021), while others promote “wrap around” and “coaching” services that would help people in the midst of a program navigate unforeseen challenges (Burris, Kumar, and Stettner 2022).

But if raising standards for non-degree credentials is the ultimate goal here—meaning at the completion of a program participants can confidently expect to gain access to high-paying, rewarding jobs with greater assurance for economic mobility and longer-term career success—we should be thinking critically about who else needs to be trained and thus re-skilled. It is high time we stop blaming workers for our long-term economic and employment woes and instead give our now-revered training infrastructure a chance to help more employers learn and grow.

DECIPHERING “SKILLS”: CLASS, NATION, GENDER

BRIDGET ANDERSON*

To call a person “low-skilled” or “unskilled” can be construed as a polite way of saying they are stupid. It is a judgment, not only on what the person can or cannot do but what, because they are assumed to lack both intelligence and imagination, they will ever be capable of. They have no social standing, no place in either the moral economy nor in civil society; their destiny is simply to sell themselves (Brace 2002). Natasha Iskander’s remarkable book (2021) demonstrates how those labeled unskilled are divested of political personhood. This divestment works because people imagine the unskilled do not have the capacity for learning. She connects the capacity for learning to the capacity for (and interest in) freedom. To put it another way, the unskilled are thought of as ignorant and as people who would not know political personhood if you served it to them on a plate.

Skill is imagined as objectively measurable. It may be represented in years of education, in qualifications, or be subject to special tests. Yet despite the systemic reliance of employment relations and labor market analyses on its analytical power, skill remains remarkably difficult to recognize. In 2008, the UK government established the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) “to provide transparent, independent and evidence-based advice to Government on where skilled labour market shortages exist that can sensibly be

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filled by migration” (MAC 2008a). The committee immediately faced the challenge of defining skill, finding that quantitatively measurable wages, qualifications, and vacancy rates needed to be supplemented by “bottom up” qualitative evidence obtained from employers, workers, and their representatives. The owners of an Aberdeen factory, for example, argued that despite the low wages of manual fish filleters, this occupation should be recognized as skilled for visa purposes. The MAC’s site visit found that “the job requires frozen fish to be filleted with great care at temperatures of minus 24 degrees. Pin-boning of defrosted fish using tweezers requires an extremely keen eye and attention to detail” (MAC 2008b: 11.33).

When faced with the limitations of the skills regime, the response of labor unions, and employers like those owners of the Aberdeen fish processing plant, has typically been to unsettle the crude binary of skilled/unskilled into the spectrum of high-skilled/semi-skilled/low-skilled/unskilled. Specialization becomes a proxy for skill, with highly specific skills claimed for particular occupations, and winning them improved wages and status. In this refined skills hierarchy, those who can turn their hand to everything—construction workers who dig and plaster today, and tomorrow lay foundations, bricks, and tiles; domestic workers who clean and cook at the same time they look after an elderly person—are unskilled. People whose aptitudes cannot be captured by the skills hierarchy are left to hustle at the bottom of the skills pile. These workers are typically the most marginalized—women, migrants, racialized, disabled, and otherwise minoritized people.

The skills regime is not simply reflecting marginalization. It is a crucial mechanism in facilitating subordination. (Un)skilled tasks are typically gendered and racialized, and while unskilled work is work that anybody can do, not *any body* can perform any role. Both the construction and domestic examples above reveal it is a fiction to claim that aptitude can be separated from the body of the laborer. Aptitudes associated with and deemed appropriate for certain types of gendered and racialized bodies are naturalized and thereby cast as unskilled.

Immigration regimes utilize both nationality and skill. They are typically twin tracks that facilitate entry for the (better paid) “brightest and the best,” and with far more controls, pre- and post-entry, for the low skilled. Visas for the latter are often issued to particular nationalities and are almost always temporary, with immigration systems designed to make it impossible to maintain legal residence for a sufficient amount of time to acquire the right to naturalize. In that way, the unskilled are shut out of citizenship and quite literally denied political personhood.

Skill and citizenship are tightly imbricated. Employers do not solely want the cheapest migrant workers, they also want certain nationalities because they are associated with physical and personal characteristics. The UK’s National Trainers Federation (an organization for racehorse trainers) argued that “work riders” should be on the MAC’s skills shortage list because, “We need light staff and the foreign staff from India and Pakistan are quite light and they’ve got good skills” (BBC News 2012). Claims about the aptitudes of

particular nationalities are a feature of employer demand for migrant workers across the world (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Anderson and Ruhs 2010). While contemporary immigration controls are careful to avoid any mention of race, they are founded on the concept of national citizenship. “National” is ambiguous and slips between its meanings of formal citizenship status, on the one hand, and belonging to the nation, on the other hand. Thus, through nationality, skills are embodied and acculturated—having small hands, or the right attitude, or being naturally more hardworking and obedient become associated with the country in which a person is born. Some states have sought to turn this to competitive advantage: The Philippines has marketed its population as a superior overseas labor force, branding Filipina domestic workers as “Supermaids” (Guevarra 2014). To designate such physical and behavioral characteristics as “racial” would be unacceptable, and rightly so, but describing them as “national” can be presented as simple common sense.

The skills regime allows for people to be designated disposable and fungible. Its ostensibly technocratic nature has contributed to it passing unremarked yet it is inextricably bound up with racial capitalism. It mobilizes race, labor, nation, migration, gender, and citizenship to divide and hierarchize. The unskilled largely (but not exclusively) inhabit the Global South where personhood, political or otherwise, is considered by the rich world to have no salience. Combined with the trick of turning race into nationality and using the mechanism of immigration controls, “skills” internationalizes class distinctions, but at the same time naturalizes national divisions between workers. Thinking against skills demonstrates the importance of rejecting the normalization of national divisions in struggles against racism and of the materiality of labor in a world of technological change. Exposing these contradictions, rejecting hierarchies of skill, has to be part of our work in dismantling gendered and racial capitalist relations.

AFRICAN AMERICANS, LABOR HISTORY, AND THE POLITICS OF SKILLS

JOE WILLIAM TROTTER JR.*

Racialized conceptions and uses of “skills” is a major theme in African American labor and working-class history. Since the advent of the transatlantic slave trade to North America, Euro-Americans have used definitions of skills not only to enrich economic and political elites but also to create

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advantages for white over Black labor. At the same time, employers have deployed the special know-how of Black workers as a mechanism to control and exploit white labor. In effect, the discriminatory use of skills buttressed the power and wealth of capitalist elites, drove a wedge between Black and white workers, and perpetuated the unequal racial as well as class stratification of the workforce and larger US political economy. A full understanding of these processes requires deeper and more systematic historical perspectives on the intersections of race, skills, and the Black experience.

Intellectual engagement with the interrelationship between skills, race, and politics is deeply rooted in early 20th-century, Jim Crow-era scholarship and popular treatments of Black workers in the US economy. George T. Surface, A. H. Stone, and other white supremacist writers vehemently argued that Black workers were “innately inferior, inefficient, lazy,” and incapable of “adapting to the [skills] requirements” of the industrial machine (Surface 1909, quoted in Trotter 1994: 497). As such, Stone and other segregationists ignored the deleterious impact of racist ideology and discriminatory labor policies and practices on the African American quest for education, technical know-how, and knowledge in the slaveholding republic and later in the Jim Crow social order that hampered the African American transition from slave to citizen.

W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles Wesley, Sterling Spero, Abram L. Harris, and other first-generation Black labor historians and their slim roster of white allies challenged white supremacist perspectives on Black workers. According to these writers, Black workers labored under what Wesley described as the “special handicaps of race and color” alongside the usual obstacles that confronted all workers under the impact of capitalism, that “debasement wage slavery” that underlay the ongoing exploitation of Black and white labor over several centuries of time (quotes from Wesley 1967: 306). Furthermore, in careful detail, early 20th-century African American labor historians also documented enslaved and later free Black workers’ acquisition and deployment of skills (defined in conventional capitalist terms) not only in the production of such lucrative staples as rice, tobacco, cotton, and sugar but also as specialized artisans (carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and brick masons, to name a few) in the construction of the nation’s economy and its infrastructure from the ground up.

Nonetheless, by focusing almost exclusively on the Black artisan, pioneering anti-racist scholarship gave little attention to the skills of the so-called unskilled or common laborer. Under the impact of the Modern Black Freedom Movement during the 1960s and 1970s, however, a new generation of Black labor and working-class historians revamped our perspective on African American workers, their skills, and their communities.

Earl Lewis, Tera Hunter, Kimberley Phillips, Jacqueline Jones, and many other late 20th-century scholars not only acknowledged the conventional skills of African American craftsmen but also underscored the know-how of Black household workers, women, coal miners, meat packers, and Pullman train porters among other occupations. In her prize-winning study of postbellum

Atlanta, historian Tera Hunter documented the skills of Black women cooks, washerwomen, and other household workers. Although all domestic work “was arduous,” as Hunter makes clear, there were “distinct, if overlapping, skills and talents involved in household labor” (Hunter 1997: 53).

The transition from open fireplaces for cooking to cast iron stoves helped to transform the labor required in cooking by the late 19th century. But cooking continued to require a good deal of skill and know-how. Hunter noted that “Black women recognized the intelligence required for the craft.” One cook described her work, accenting the knowledge that it required, “Everything I does, I does by my head; its all brain work.” Similarly, washerwomen creatively manufactured “their own soap from lye, starch from wheat bran, and wash tubs from beer barrels cut in half” (Hunter 1997: 55–56).

For their part, Black coal miners, stereotyped as “unskilled” coal loaders and valued more for their brawn than their brain, deployed a broad range of skills during the handloading era. Their repertoire of skills included techniques for dynamiting coal seams, in-depth familiarity with gases and principles of mine ventilation, and ways to set roof supports to prevent dangerous and even deadly cave-ins. Even in the straightforward work of handloading a train car with coal, one Black miner, Watt Teal, recalled how his father taught him how to load coal in a way that preserved his health as well as his life. He said, “There is a little art to it” (Trotter 1990: 86).

Employers regularly manipulated skills of workers so that Blacks were routinely paid less than whites performing the same work with comparable skills. In Memphis and Houston, employers classified skilled African American workers as “helpers” in order to avoid paying skilled wages. At the Firestone Company in Memphis, one Black employee vividly described the company policy, “You’d be classified as a ‘helper,’ but you’d be doing all the work. The white man would get the high wage” (Trotter 2019: 88).

White workers regularly collaborated with employers to the disadvantage of Black workers. In some cases, however, they became the target of the racial manipulation of skills. In McDowell County, West Virginia, for example, the manager of one large coal company explained how he used the skills of one Black worker to set the pace for an entire work crew of white workers. “We try to standardize our work as much as possible. One day one of the groups of [white] coal cutters at a certain mine decided that five places were all that any one man could cut in a day. I went to my Negro cutter and told him to go down to that place and we would give [him] all the places he wanted and a \$100 [bill] besides. That night this Negro cut 25 places. We standardized at seven” (Trotter 1990: 109). As suggested by this example, the acquisition of skills enabled a small number of Black workers to inch up a notch in the occupational hierarchy during the industrial era. Moreover, artisans had fueled the rise of a small, free Black population by the onset of the Civil War.

Echoes of discriminatory industrial and even pre-industrial uses of skills carried forward into the emerging post-industrial years of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In Pittsburgh, by the onset of the new millennium,

Esther L. Bush, President and CEO of the Urban League of Pittsburgh, described the “Golden Triangle,” which was Pittsburgh’s downtown site of new high-tech job creation, as more akin to an “Iron Circle—a never-ending cycle of glass ceilings, revolving doors and broken ladders”—for Black workers (Trotter and Day 2010: 147).

African American labor and working-class history offer a compelling case study of the many ways that skills have been defined, deployed, and used to create a racially divided workforce. It demonstrates how racialized skill narratives and social practices helped to create and sustain the color line in the American economy and heightened the exploitation of Black workers over several centuries of time. A history of the African American worker also suggests a framework for rethinking the complicated interplay of race, class, and skills in the history of the American working class and its capacity to organize in its own collective self-interests today.

REDUCING THE “UNSKILLED” TO THEIR BODIES: CONTROL, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE NEW POLITICS OF SKILL

NATASHA ISKANDER*

What is skill? What counts as expertise? How do we determine who is skilled? Scholars of work have shown just how political the answers to these questions are—at the workplace and beyond. Through analyses of both historical and contemporary definitions of skill, they have shown that the answers are always inimically informed by the structure of economic systems, by the production and defense of social hierarchies, and by the contours and distribution of political power (Attewell 1990; Moss and Tilly 2001; Payne 2009). Skill lends itself to these political uses because it is difficult to define; in practice it is unclear, difficult to discern, and contested (Lowe 2021). Because of its ambiguity, its assessment doubles as a powerful tool to justify and strengthen forms of inequity rooted in categories of social difference, such as race, gender, and immigration status. Implicit in this take on skill politics, however, is that skill’s misappraisal, though driven by politics and prejudice, is a mistake, and that, given the political will, this mistake can be corrected. The contribution of workers, regardless of social position, can be fully valued and fully compensated.

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But what this take on the politics of skill overlooks is that the concept of skill contains its own political logic, one that is divorced from its appraisal and does not depend on its alliance with other markers of social difference to structure power relations. This logic stems from the idea that skill is a stand-alone asset that can be assessed accurately, and that that assessment would show that some people have skill and others do not. This view of skill creates the possibility for a particular definition of the category of unskilled as a fixed status that refers not to the not-yet-skilled but rather to a class of people *devoid of skill* as an almost ontological condition. In this political portrayal, unskilled people are characterized as not having fully developed the registers required for learning: the imagination and discernment to apprehend different kinds of competence, the desire and aspiration to acquire them, and the dedication needed to learn them. By denying the unskilled the more abstract, more agentic, and more subjective registers of personhood, these representations reduce the unskilled down to their bodies. Their contribution to the economy and to their jobs becomes recast as corporeal: The function of the unskilled at work is in and through their racialized and gendered physicality.

This political logic has been remarkably consistent across time, across contexts, and across industries, even if it has not always been explicit. From jobs in retail, care work (Osterman 2017), and hospitality in the service sector (Sherman 2007) through to jobs in manufacturing (Fernandez 2001) and construction (Iskander and Lowe 2010), the notion—sometimes implicit but always influential—that some workers are categorically unskilled and thus contribute to production primarily through their physicality has structured job quality, produced occupational exclusion, and truncated career ladders. But this notion has arguably been most pernicious when it has become embroiled with ideas about innovation and entangled with industry initiatives to incorporate new technologies in production. If innovation describes the application of new knowledge and the development of new dimensions of skill, it is also another way of talking about who has this new knowledge and who has the capacity to develop new dimensions of skill.

The clearest recent historical example of the enmeshment of skill politics and innovation policy is in the sweeping influence of Taylorist scientific management. The core premise of this management approach was that conception could be split off from execution, and that the labor process could be decoupled from the skills of workers. Craftsmen could be shucked of their skill, which could then be appropriated by management, refined through rigorous time-and-motion studies, decomposed into a series of bodily movements, and then re-imposed onto those craftsmen, now made laborers, to achieve cost savings and greater efficiency (Spender and Kijne 2012). Although Frederick Taylor himself had a relatively nuanced view of skill, his reductive method was hailed when he first articulated it in the 1900s and well into the 20th century as the most consequential innovation in the organization of production since automation. His methods spilled

past the factory into the construction, health care, and service industries, always bringing with it, under the guise of business innovation, its view of unskilled workers, especially the premise that workers, who were considered devoid of skill, could be made useful through the regimentation of their bodies (Taska 2017).

While scientific management has gone through multiple permutations over the past century, its most troubling re-invention has been at Amazon, where the heightened control of workers' bodies has been brazenly touted as innovation. Amazon has pioneered an extensive and comprehensive system of surveillance that combines artificial intelligence, video monitoring, robotics, heat maps, and wrist bands with geolocation to track and manage workers' actions (Hanley and Hubbard 2020). This proprietary technology system is used not to augment workers' capacity but rather to control their bodies and even override their physical needs. Amazon's algorithm-enhanced management tracks workers in real time, down to the second, and dictates when staff can take bathroom breaks; how drivers can turn their heads and adjust their seats in response to traffic conditions; and how quickly workers in fulfillment centers must bend, twist, and lift to move packages (Williams 2021). The pace and bodily movements enforced by algorithm has produced an anomalously high and growing rate of injury: Amazon's warehouse workers suffer double the rate of serious injury compared to other fulfillment centers. Under the cover of innovation, workers defined as unskilled are denied the right and the ability to control their own bodies, to respond to their environment, and to exercise their judgement and intelligence (Greene and Alcantara 2021).

Harry Braverman called this managerial strategy to separate workers from their skill a process of *deskilling*, but he and others after him who expanded on his argument bought into the definition of skill that scientific managers were peddling (Braverman 1998; Previtali and Fagiani 2015). They took at face value the proposition that workers could be made, at least representationally, devoid of skill and that managerial and technological innovations could shunt workers indefinitely into the category of unskilled. But what these critiques have overlooked is that workers in these systems have had to develop deep and nuanced capacity to resist the full control of their bodies (Moore, Upchurch, and Whittaker 2018.) They have had to draw on their skill to retain their autonomy and dignity in the face of systems designed to reduce them to their physicality. Moreover, production systems need workers to violate the rules dictating their movements and respond to problems that arise day-to-day, problems unanticipated by the scientific management charts or the more contemporary algorithms, if they are to function at all (Benassi and Dorigatti 2022). At Amazon, drivers have honed strategies to evade the algorithm; workers in warehouses have developed tactics to steal moments of rest; and employees have begun to organize, banding together to create a union in one of the most significant labor victories in the United States in a generation. In response, the retail behemoth has sharpened its technological surveillance of workers, censoring terms in employee

chatrooms and slack exchanges that refer to exploitation and resistance and monitoring workers' social media presence outside the worksite (Costantz 2021). Through these measures, the company has sought to snuff out expressions of agency and discernment and to drag the workers that the company defines as unskilled back to an existence that is confined to their corporeality (Klippenstein 2022).

Even as Amazon is refining its methods of surveillance and control, the company, already the second-largest employer in the United States, has begun to market its system to other companies as a major innovation in human resource management. The rhetoric around the control of workers defined as unskilled in this management approach has seeped into political debates on the labor market implications of innovation and who the future of work will and should benefit. Thus, the battle Amazon and others are setting up is not primarily over the (mis)appraisal of skill and the devaluing of certain social groups through biased skill assessments, but rather it is over who should have the political right to the aspects of personhood that skill and learning imply: the right to bodily autonomy and integrity, the right to voice and agency, the right to discernment and creativity.

THE POLITICS OF SKILLING AND MIGRATION IN INDIA

RINA AGARWALA*

Since the early 2000s, scholars, policymakers, and government officials in India have framed “skilling” the labor force as a new panacea for a range of national ills including poverty, unemployment, the demographic dividend, labor market exclusion, climate change, gender inequality, and child labor. At the firm level, skilling has been celebrated for its potential to increase organizational growth, innovation, entrepreneurship, job satisfaction, and women’s empowerment. (For an excellent review of the recent literature on skill, see Cabral and Dhar 2019.)

Such support has enabled the Indian government, across party lines, to earmark billions of rupees for new initiatives and institutions designed to promote skill development. Underlying these state investments is a claim for a new economic growth strategy that will rely entirely on skilled, rather than unskilled, labor. This intention was articulated in the 11th Five-Year

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Plan's (2007–2012) new Skill Development Mission that promised to increase the share of the trained labor force from 2% to approximately 100% by 2022 (Government of India 2008: 91)—a promise that remains far from realization. In 2009, the Congress-led government launched a new National Policy on Skill Development to standardize the multiplying skilling efforts and to help link the supply of skilled labor to demand in the public and private sectors. And in 2015, the Bharatiya Janata Party launched a new Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship to govern the nation's expanding skilling infrastructure, as well as the world's largest vocational training program.¹

These initiatives hold several new promises. For employers, they indicate a new state attempt to quickly build the technical competencies required for the constantly changing production needs of India's recently liberalized and globalized markets. For India's mass labor force, especially its bulging youth population, they offer a new modicum of hope to access coveted, privileged, high-wage jobs in the global "knowledge economy" within India and abroad. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi predicted on July 15, 2015, "The workforce requirements of the world will be fulfilled only by India. . . . If China is identified as the world's manufacturing factory, then India has the potential to become [the world's] human resource capital." Moreover, unlike past skilling efforts that targeted the minority of workers who are formally employed, India's contemporary skilling efforts also target the 94% of workers who are informally employed (as self-employed or contract workers). Finally, unlike past skilling efforts that focused on formal education, contemporary efforts expand and recognize vocational, technical, apprenticeship, and even informal training—all of which are far more accessible than formal education.

If implemented properly, these initiatives could help millions of Indians attain new skills.² But they will fail to be transformative for India's masses, because they continue to define skill as it has always been defined in India: as a mark of distinction that empowers some citizens over others. As I detail elsewhere (2022), this can be profoundly seen in India's emigration regimes in which the state has long used skill to legitimize class inequities and state control over the poor or unskilled.

Since the early 1900s (starting under British colonialism) and continuing to this day, the Indian government has legally controlled its citizens' global mobility based on their skill level. Using the number of years of formal schooling, India has sorted its citizens into a vaulted category of "skilled" versus a denigrated category of "unskilled." Contrary to many countries that export unskilled workers to ease local unemployment and retain skilled workers to fulfill local needs, India has consistently done the reverse: granting the skilled more mobility and freedom from government control than the unskilled. Until the early 1980s, India retained the colonial-era 1920

¹This program is known as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana.

²To date, implementation has been (perhaps, unsurprisingly) woeful.

Indian Emigration Act, which stipulated that emigrants with less than 12 (later 10) years of education were legally forbidden to emigrate. This act was enforced by denying these citizens a passport stamp, monitoring documentation at airports and seaports, and employing police enforcement, surveillance technologies, and physical barriers along national borders. At the same time, skilled emigrants, such as students and professionals, were given exceptions and permitted to move abroad, sometimes with settlement packages and subsidized airfare.

Over time, unskilled Indians fought against these restrictions, demanding their right to free movement in pursuit of employment. The lack of jobs within India, combined with the swelling demand for labor in the Gulf countries during the 1970s' oil boom, forced the Indian government to liberalize emigration in 1983, which gave a veneer of consistency across citizens' classes and skills. But in practice, the state still restricts unskilled emigrants' mobility by subjecting them to regulations, requirements, and fees that are not applied to skilled emigrants (and skill is still measured by years of formal education). To implement these restrictions, the government's Protectorate General of Emigrants retains the power to prevent unskilled citizens from legally exiting India's borders by denying them the coveted government-issued emigration clearance stamp in their passport (a stamp that is required only for unskilled workers). Meanwhile, the government facilitates fast-track visa services for students planning to study abroad and institutes no emigration restrictions against those graduating from the nation's high-quality, publicly financed education system.

India's differential control over citizens' mobility based on a crude binary of skilled versus unskilled has had several deleterious consequences. It has widened class-based inequalities within India. It has undermined the democratic state's promise to grant citizens equal rights. And it has enabled the notorious "brain drain," thereby undermining the state's developmental promise to modernize. Yet the Indian state has attained public consent for such controls by arguing that it is fulfilling its responsibility to protect "the poor and vulnerable," securing India's global image as a "non-coolie" nation, and ensuring a ready labor supply for domestic needs. For all these justifications, "skill" has provided the legitimized measure of distinction.

The persistent and crucial role of skill in India's emigration practices raises important questions around India's new skilling initiatives. First, despite the excitement over alternative and more accessible training forms, the Indian government continues to restrict emigration based on an earlier measure using formal education. As a result, poor workers who have invested in vocational or technical training are still restricted in their pursuit of employment abroad if they lack formal education. This restriction raises the question of whether old measures of skill will eventually be phased out or remain as an additional mark of distinction above the new measures. Relatedly, since the "skilled" retain their vaulted status only in relation to the "unskilled," is it truly possible to eliminate the latter group (as promised by the new initiatives)? Or will the bottom of the skill hierarchy simply be

renamed from “unskilled” to certain low-value vocational skills? Understanding how new and old definitions of skill will co-exist and what the new power hierarchy of skill categories will look like is important, because such groupings still determine people’s access to basic freedoms, such as global mobility and access to income for survival.

Second, recent skilling initiatives have shifted the locus of power in the politics of skill. In emigration, the Indian government, or what I call “the migration state,” has long held the power to define, value, and accredit skills. And migrants have sometimes used their electoral power to pressure the state in these areas (Agarwala 2022). But recent initiatives have empowered private employers and “the market” to determine what skills are needed and how skills should be valued in terms of wages and accreditation. This shift raises important questions as to how workers can assert their power and their interests to value their skills against the competing interests of private employers to devalue those very skills.

Third, recent skilling initiatives have catalyzed an enormous private, for-profit skilling industry designed to certify and train Indians. Even migrant recruiters have joined the business. As a result, poor families are going into debt to pay for programs promising to “skill” their children. But despite state promises to standardize and accredit these private programs, little progress has been made. Therefore, legitimacy remains with the traditional, formal education institutions that are largely inaccessible to the poor. Unless this imbalance between the perceived legitimacy of formal versus informal training programs is addressed, earlier definitions of skill will continue to serve as a primary marker of social difference.

Fourth, while past skills training initiatives assumed formally regulated and protected employment as the optimal pathway to job creation, new initiatives valorize precarious and individualized options of entrepreneurship and self-employment. Self-employment thus comprises the fastest growing category of jobs for return migrants (and local workers), making India notorious for its “jobless” growth. And temporary emigration provides the primary option of employment for those with too little formal education. This trend could lead to massive unrest and discontent among the youth, who have been promised greater power and prosperity based on their newly attained “skills.”

Finally, “skilling” is currently framed as a way to trump other identity-based inequities, such as caste, gender, and ethnicity. Yet women are forbidden to emigrate to certain countries regardless of their skill level (Agarwala 2022). Therefore, we must examine how workers across all castes, genders, and ethnicities will be differentially sorted across the various newfound skills of recent initiatives.

In the sphere of Indian emigration, skill has never been a mere technical fix for upward mobility. To this day, despite the new celebrations around skill development, it remains a social and relational category of power and a legitimized way to exclude and marginalize some workers. Ignoring this will further occlude India’s deepening class inequities. Exposing it might offer a first step to ensuring that India skilling results in India empowering.

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